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India Bars Senior U.S. Diplomat, Stirring a Dispute

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 1 — India has refused to accept a senior American diplomat in New Delhi, touching off a dispute with the Reagan Administration.

The dispute, over the assignment of George G. B. Griffin as political counselor, the third-ranking post in the United States Embassy, has aggravated the strain in relations between the two countries, American officials said. The United States has retaliated by barring a senior Indian diplomat.

It is unusual for a government to block a foreign diplomat from taking up an assignment. Ambassadors are subject to scrutiny, but lower-ranking diplomats generally take up their posts without prior agreement. As a result, the Indians' refusal to accept Mr. Griffin is being described by State Department officials as "unprecedented."

The matter has attracted attention because of the conviction of senior American officials that Mr. Griffin, whose last post was as the second-ranking officer in the embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, has been singled out by Moscow for attack, and that India has yielded to a "Soviet disinformation campaign."

On Dec. 4, 1980, The Patriot, an Indian Communist newspaper, accused Mr. Griffin of spreading falsehoods about the situation in Afghanistan. Tass, the Soviet press agency, picked up the report, and it was broadcast back to India by the Moscow radio.

State Department officials said Mr. Griffin had been traveling from his post in Kabul to see his wife in New Delhi. While there, he occasionally briefed reporters on the situation in Afghanistan.

Last May 4, Blitz, an Indian Communist weekly, attacked the Central Intelligence Agency and called Mr. Griffin a leader of C.I.A. operations against the

Afghan Government. The report was also picked up by Tass. The Soviet press agency, erring on Mr. Griffin's first name and his last assignment, said:

"The not unknown John Griffin, a major specialist of the C.I.A., who, from Pakistani territory, guided secret operations of the American spy department against Afghanistan, is being transferred from Pakistan to New Delhi."

"Griffin's duties, which were concealed under the roof of the United States Embassy in Islamabad, included the supply of weapons to the bands of Afghan mercenaries who had found refuge in Pakistan."

"Now his bosses are sending him to a new sector of work, which will signify a broadening of diversionary and spy activities of the C.I.A. in India."

Bhupesh Gupta, a Communist deputy, denounced Mr. Griffin in the Indian Parliament and asked the Foreign Ministry to stop him from giving press briefings. Mr. Gupta charged that, on an earlier assignment to Calcutta in 1969, Mr. Griffin worked against the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

U.S. Protests to Soviet

The reprinting of the allegations by the Soviet press prompted the United States in early May to protest to the Soviet Foreign Ministry. The department took the unusual step of denying that Mr. Griffin worked for the C.I.A.

"The story is, of course, false," the department said. "George Griffin is a career Foreign Service officer, who is currently the acting deputy chief of mission in our embassy in Kabul. In view of the obvious falsehood, we can only conclude that it was designed to complicate Indian-American relations."

In addition, officials said, the United States told India that Mr. Griffin, who is

46 years old, was not a C.I.A. agent, but a career officer with long experience in countries of the Indian subcontinent.

Yet, a few weeks before Mr. Griffin was due to leave for his new post, India advised the United States on July 28 that he would not be accepted.

Indian sources in New Delhi said they did not dispute the facts about Mr. Griffin, but thought it in the interest of better relations that he not come.

The State Department told India that, if he was not accepted, a senior Indian diplomat would also be barred. The Indians did not change their position.

State Dept. Responds to Inquiry

Word of Mr. Griffin's case spread through the State Department in recent days. In answer to an inquiry, the department said today:

"We believe the Indian decision on George Griffin was unwarranted. Griffin is an experienced, responsible Foreign Service Officer. He has had an outstanding career which has included many difficult assignments. He has acted at all times in accordance with instructions and the norms of proper diplomatic behavior. That this action was taken at a time when Griffin has been a target of a Soviet disinformation campaign makes it particularly regrettable. He is being reassigned to a position of appropriately senior responsibility."

Relations between the United States and India have been strained for a number of reasons. The Indians have reacted strongly to the Reagan Administration's decisions to help Pakistan modernize its armed forces through the sale of F-16 jets. The Administration believes that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is too closely aligned to Soviet policies, citing, in particular, India's diplomatic recognition of the Vietnam-backed Cambodian Government.